

ABSTRACT

The people whose history is considered in this work, have been deliberately described as immigrants although many of them had been born in Guiana, and not a few of them had lived all their lives in the colony. The description is justifiable: In the eyes of the law, the status of the Indians was that of immigrants and in the perception of the larger Guianese society, the Indians constituted an alien presence; then, too, the Indians saw themselves as transients in a strange land. These factors helped to determine the direction which the development of the East Indian community in the colony would take. This study is concerned with that development between 1891 and 1930.

The terminus ad quem has been set at 1930 to allow scope for a consideration of the response of East Indians to the change of the colony's political constitution in 1928. This consideration is necessary in the light of the oft-made observation that East Indians of an earlier period had been indifferent to political developments in Guiana. The tendency towards what we have described as cultural encystment did not start at the terminus a quo. But, developments in the 1890's which are discussed in this work, helped to accelerate the process of encystment.

This is not the first attempt to write a history of East Indians in the colony or of Indian immigration into Guiana. Historians like Dwarka Nath, Peter Ruhomon, Keith Laurence and Robert Moore have written on the subject(s). But, as far as we know, this is the first attempt to historicize from the stand-point of the Indian community itself, and to examine the changes which East Indians and Indian institutions underwent in Guiana, primarily in terms of the inner dynamic of the Indian community and in terms of the response of the immigrants to their Guianese environment of sugar plantation, settlement, village and town. The point of departure in our discussion is the village in India. We look at the causes which led to the migration of the Indians from the sub-continent and the contingent consequences which these entailed for the migrants in Guiana. Next, we set about an examination of the adjustments, accomodations and adaptations which Indians had had to make as they restructured their lives in the colony. Thus, we look at the process whereby Indian peasants (kamins) were transformed into industrial labourers, at their response to life among the plantation barracks, and at the process of reconstruction as it was continued by free Indians in the villages and towns. We end with an examination of the response of East Indians to the larger Guianese society.

Although our approach may be described as socio-cultural, we have refrained from making technical sociological analyses (for which we are ill-equipped, in any case). Where we have made use of the insights of sociologists and anthropologists, we have tried to avoid undue involvement in and debate of either their jargon or generalisations. If anything, we have, in our conclusion, stood the sociologists on their heads! Our discursive style has been determined both by our interest and our aim. It has not been our concern to demonstrate that East Indians made a great contribution to the Guianese economy or to show that some of them were successful in that they obtained wealth or acquired a good education in the colony. Our aim has been to piece together the history of an immigrant people in such a way that the ~~factors~~ that gave that group its peculiar ethos as well as its cohesion might not be overlooked. We believe that we have achieved our aim in large measure.

The value of this study lies, perhaps, in the insights it offers for an understanding of the peculiar nature of an important segment of present-day Guyanese society. An understanding of the reasons for and the manner of the inverse cultural assimilation of the immigrants, is an indispensable condition for the integration of their descendants into the mainstream of Guyanese life. This integration, in turn, is a sine qua non if

Guyana is to advance in its growth to fuller nationhood. It is hoped that this study will help to discredit some of the myths and stereotypes by which East Indians have been characterised and by which many of them have perceived themselves. It is hoped, too, that the problem involving the East Indian community will be seen for what it was and still is: more a tendency to withdraw into cultural encystment in the face of real or imagined threat to its racial and cultural identity, than a slow process of creolization as that process has been defined by Chandra Jayawardena. Quite apart from these utilitarian considerations, however, the process by which an uprooted people reconstructed its life in a new environment is interesting enough to warrant investigation and discussion for its own sake.